



# NEWS RELEASE

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### ***Taking the bite out of food allergies***

By Staff Sgt. Kelly Bridgwater  
Europe Regional Medical Command Public Affairs

Allie DeFrieze knows first hand what it is like to live with a food allergy. After suffering from nausea and vomiting after meals and the resulting severe anemia, she was eventually diagnosed with Celiac Sprue Disease, an allergy to gluten, wheat, oats, rye, and barley.

“A food allergy is defined as an immune system response that causes adverse (physical) reaction to a patient through ingestion or contact with a food,” said Lt. Col. Stephen N. Marks, an allergist at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center.

In December 2005, Food and Drug Administration estimated that two percent of adults and five percent of infants and young children in the United States suffer from food allergies. Approximately 30,000 consumers require emergency room treatment and 150 Americans die each year because of allergic reactions to food. Thankfully, doctors diagnosed DeFrieze’s in time.

“At first doctors thought I was lactose intolerant or that I had diverticulosis,” said the 33-year-old DeFrieze. “I went through a number of medical tests for six months before I was properly diagnosed. They even thought I had gastro esophageal reflux disease or GERD as it is more commonly known.”

After her diagnosis, DeFrieze altered her eating and food shopping habits and found instant relief.

“Before I discovered my food allergies I was extremely anemic,” she said. “My iron level continued to decrease even while taking iron supplements. Doctors initially thought this was due to me having back-to-back pregnancies and maybe even an ulcer. But after being properly diagnosed and cutting out all wheat and gluten from my diet I had immediate relief.”

The culprits behind adverse reactions like DeFrieze's are not unusual foods but ones eaten by the majority of people on a daily basis. They are everyday foods that are found in a number of products.

"The foods the majority of people are allergic to are; milk, eggs, fish (such as halibut and cod), shellfish (shrimp, and lobster), tree nuts (such as walnuts), peanuts, wheat, and soybeans," according to Belinda Steinacker, a nutritionist at Heidelberg Army Community Hospital.

Food Allergy and Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN, <http://www.foodallergy.org/>) describes the common food allergy symptoms that range from a tingling sensation in the mouth, swelling of the tongue and the throat, difficulty breathing, hives, vomiting, abdominal cramps, diarrhea, drop in blood pressure, and loss of consciousness to death. Symptoms typically appear from within minutes to two hours after the person has eaten the food to which he or she is allergic.

Having a food allergy is a serious health concern, and things can get downright deadly for those who suffer from it.

"If the reaction affects a person's breathing or, they feel light-headed, dizzy, or experience an abrupt onset of symptoms such as hives or swelling, they need emergency care," said Marks. "In a case like this an ambulance should be called right away. There is also a medication that people with known food allergies can carry. It is an injectable form of epinephrine, commonly prescribed as an Epi-Pen," he said.

"If you have an immediate type of reaction resulting in anaphylaxis (an often severe and sometimes fatal reaction in a person exposed to a food allergen) this is a life threatening condition which can lead to death within minutes."

Though reactions can sometimes be fatal, it is not impossible to live an active life if you have food allergies. Success involves careful planning when shopping for foods by reading all food label ingredients and knowing what ingredients can pose a potential threat.

"Become a label reader," said DeFrieze. "Educate yourself on the different ingredients that the allergen could be disguised as. For example, gluten is often listed as modified food starch or edible food starch," she said.

"Thanks to a recently approved labeling system from the FDA, ingredients have become easier to read," said Steinacker. "Food package translation can be difficult to understand because you may have three or four different words used on a label that mean a form of milk has been added. For children this can be even harder to understand if the words are not easily recognized."

On Jan. 1, 2006, the FDA began requiring food labels to clearly state if food products contain any ingredients with protein derived from the eight major allergenic foods. The Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act of 2004 also required manufacturers to identify in plain English the presence of ingredients that contain protein derived from milk, eggs, fish, crustacean, shellfish, tree nuts, peanuts, wheat, or soybeans in the list of ingredients. It also allowed

manufacturers to say the product “contains” followed by the name of the source of the food allergen after or adjacent to the list of ingredients.

All experts agree that the best treatment for food allergies is to avoid the particular food product.

“There is only one treatment and that is strict avoidance of a person’s known food allergen,” said Marks. “For accidental exposure by those who have experienced a serious reaction, they must carry an Epi-pen (an injectable epinephrine) with them at all times. You should also wear a medical alert bracelet listing the type of allergies you have.”

Even though an allergy sufferer may avoid their known food allergen, exposure can still take place. If someone is allergic to peanuts eats at a restaurant where peanuts are ground or chopped near non-peanut food dishes the chance for cross-contamination can occur.

“I often eat before I attend parties or events,” said DeFrieze. “Since I don’t know how the food was prepared or what is specifically in that food I have to be careful.”

The biggest struggle for parents of children with food allergies is making sure their young children are aware of what foods can make them sick.

“Adults understand the consequences much better than children do about the effects of their allergy,” said Steinacker. “In this case the biggest concern is when children are involved in ‘food activities’ such as attending a birthday party or snacks that are being served at school.”

There is no cure for food allergies. There is no medication that can replace diligent label reading. Be aware of the ingredients in your food. Carry an Epi-pen and wear a medical alert bracelet.

“In general, if you have a food allergy, use your resources,” said Steinacker. “See a dietician, see a professional.”

Soldiers, family members, and authorized Department of Defense civilians can call central appointments at the Heidelberg Army Hospital and schedule an appointment with the nutrition care division. You may contact the appointment desk by dialing commercial 06221.17.2622, or DSN 371.3316.

